ID: 22

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Title: Media Representations of Intimate Partner Violence: Gender Differences in Attributions of Responsibility

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Objectives: To examine how respondent gender mediates attributions of responsibility and sympathy in ways that (a) increase attributions of perpetrator responsibility; (b) decrease attributions of perpetrator responsibility; (c) increase attributions of victim responsibility; and (d) decrease attributions of victim responsibility.

Background: This study used Weiner’s (1980) attribution-emotion-action model to examine how information about perpetrators and victims in news articles about IPV situations influence readers’ attributions of responsibility.

Methods: The survey began by presenting participants with a description of a news story about a man who allegedly hit a woman. Participants were then presented with a list of statements about the perpetrator and were asked to rate, given that particular piece of information, how responsible for the situation they would rate the perpetrator. The same procedure was followed for the victim. Response categories were Likert-type scales ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much so).

Results: While female and male participants gave fairly high ratings of perpetrator responsibility across all statements, females rated the perpetrator significantly more responsible than males when the perpetrator was “in the military” (F(1, 66) = 7.85, p = 0.01), “suspected his wife of infidelity” (F(1, 66) = 18.90, p = 0.00), and was “extremely jealous” (F(1, 66) = 5.44, p=0.02). Male participants were significantly more likely to rate the victim responsible if she had “no visible injuries” (F(1, 66) = 4.16, p = 0.045).

Conclusion: These findings suggest that distinct differences exist in how females and males assign attributions of responsibility in an IPV news story, highlighting the importance of how the media frames messages of IPV to influence perceptions of responsibility. By understanding how statements influence perceptions of IPV, media outlets can become more effective in serving as advocates against IPV and use media exposure as a means to provide information about where people experiencing IPV can go for help. Furthermore, media outlets should be conscious of how they report information on IPV in order to avoid stereotyping the perpetrator and the victim.